Goals of English Pronunciation Instruction

Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani

Abstract—Pronunciation plays a crucial role in language use, language development and language learning. In the context of English language teaching (ELT), pronunciation is an integral aspect of communicative competence that can impact the desire to use the language as well as the quantity and quality of input received and output produced. Although there is a small and committed body of individuals who have worked to encourage the incorporation of pronunciation instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, pronunciation still tends to be the neglected component of many language programs. In this paper, some important goals for PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION such as increased pronunciation research, focus on developing learners’ communicative competence, focus on pronunciation in teacher education, focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility, focus on methods and materials development, use of useful instructional software, and focus on the suprasegmentals are reviewed in detail.

Index Terms—Communicative competence, intelligibility and comprehensibility, methods and materials development, software, suprasegmentals

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of English language teaching (ELT), pronunciation is an integral aspect of communicative competence [27] that can impact the desire to use the language [19] as well as the quantity and quality of input received and output produced [14]. Pronunciation tends to be neglected in the second language (L2) classroom, and L2 teachers are frightened by the idea of teaching pronunciation [6]. Yet, PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION does not have a secure place in most language curriculums [34]. Within the current trend in ELT, it is up to individual teachers to incorporate PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION into their lessons [21], [11]. However, a lack of formal training combined with an absence of program directives means that is up to teachers to inform and prepare themselves on how to best meet their students’ needs [4], [14], [25]. Consequently, most teachers do not provide instruction at all and those few that do generally adopt a hit or miss approach, relying on materials that lack grounding and the desired results [14].

Consequently, most teachers do not provide instruction at all and those few that do generally adopt a hit or miss approach, relying on materials that lack grounding and the desired results [14]. This situation is worsened by the fact that pronunciation is marginalized and treated superficially [26], [36].

Therefore, it is important to understand that students are not receiving the training they need in this important aspect of linguistic competence. What would effective and efficient pronunciation instruction for L2 learners? This paper reviews nine goals that are very important for teaching pronunciation. They are increased attention from researchers, focus on developing learners’ communicative competence, a focus on teacher education, focus on intelligibility/comprehensibility, focus on methods and materials development, use of useful instructional software, and focus on the suprasegmentals.

II. INCREASED PRONUNCIATION RESEARCH

How much attention does pronunciation get from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers? [5] surveyed four journals between 1975-1988 and found that very few articles on pronunciation were published during that time. There is still a very small percentage of articles devoted to our field in the general ESL/SLA research journals, with a range of 2.7% to 7.4% from 1999-2008 [10].

Many teachers do not pay enough attention to pronunciation instruction. L2 teachers are worried that they aren’t well prepared to teach pronunciation, or even to incorporate some pronunciation activities into their regular language classrooms. They feel as though they don’t know where to start. This is where research comes in. Practical research can help teachers to determine where to put the focus. [12] showed that most of the phonological changes that immigrants make in acquiring their L2 occur during the first year in the L2 environment. That is not to say that there aren’t any changes after that, for [36] demonstrated that there surely are, but the first year is when the most progress is made in the absence of pronunciation instruction.

[28] collected speech samples six times in the first year that two groups of adult ESL learners were in Canada. They were speakers of Mandarin and Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian and one Serbo-Croatian). [28] extracted vowels from the samples and conducted identification tests with human listeners who classified the vowels as belonging to an English vowel category, and then they determined how many productions were classified as the intended vowel. After one
The identification scores for the vowel in the word “beat” were very high. The Mandarins’ productions received a score of 97% and the Slavic language speakers had a score of 90%; in other words, the vowel in the word “beat” was interpreted by listeners as the intended vowel most of the time. It would have been a waste of precious classroom time to work on this vowel with these learners. The vowel in the word “bit” presented quite a different story. The Mandarin speakers’ correct identification score went from 31% to 41% in their first year; the Slavic language speakers’ scores on this vowel also improved fairly dramatically, going from 20% to 48%, but neither group was able to produce this vowel correctly even half the time. This vowel is thus an ideal candidate for instruction. It has a high functional load which means that it distinguishes a large number of words, and learners, at least from these two language groups, aren’t going to make sufficient progress on their own.

They have carried out a similar study with consonants and consonant clusters in word-initial and word-final position and found that many segments and combinations of segments did not require any intervention. These are just a few examples to show that research does have something to contribute to what teachers do in the classroom [28].

III. FOCUS ON DEVELOPING LEARNERS’ COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Communicative competence is the aim of pronunciation teaching and learning [32], [29], [15]. [32] stressed the need for meaningful communicative tasks in the language classroom, including those that focus on pronunciation. Pronunciation exercises that relate to daily use of English include, for example, role-plays of requests that learners have to make (e.g., to ask a boss for a day off or to ask a bank teller to cash a check) [18].

Learners can become careful listeners in their own conversations. [30] shows that learners need exposure to conversations so they can hear variation in pronunciation. By using audiotapes and videotapes, teachers can give learners meaningful exposure to variation in pronunciation and increase their communicative competence.

IV. FOCUS ON PRONUNCIATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

There have been many improvement in pronunciation instruction, as [16], [7] and others have published very useful resources for teachers. There are also good student resources now available for use such as [17], [31] and others. Although this is not a complete list, there still have a long way to go. First, there is a definite need for more courses for ESL/EFL teachers. There are very few TESL programs that offer a full course in teaching pronunciation. Not only are there not enough courses in pronunciation pedagogy, there are TESL programs that have no requirement for even an introductory course in linguistics, which is surprising indeed. In addition to initial training for all ESL/EFL teachers, there is also a role for ongoing professional development. Some studies show that many ESL/EFL teachers don’t feel comfortable dealing with teaching pronunciation.

An increased focus on pronunciation should extend to classroom teachers as well, even though they are not necessarily designated as language teachers. While English is a stress-timed language, many other languages are syllable-timed languages. English tends to stress one or two syllables and pronounce the rest of the word or sentence. This means that English sounds are often unclear to some speakers of other languages. Therefore, pronouncing equally stressed words or sentences may increase students’ comprehension along with adjusted speech rate.” [9] This is a case where a little knowledge can be a bad thing. Teachers should be modelling accurate pronunciation, not trying to imitate their L2 students by putting equal stress on every syllable. Students should be able to communicate with other people in the community. They need to hear which syllables have reduced vowels and which do not. All teachers would benefit from an increased understanding of L2 pronunciation.

V. FOCUS ON INTELLIGIBILITY AND COMPREHENSIBILITY

The other goal is a focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility, rather than accentuatedness. Accentuatedness is a judgment of how much one’s speech differs phonologically from the local variety. Comprehensibility is a judgment of how easy or difficult an individual’s pronunciation is to understand. Intelligibility is the degree to which a listener understands a speaker. In other words, accent is difference, comprehensibility is effort, and intelligibility is actual understanding.

[23] described two approaches to pronunciation instruction: one of these follows the nativist principle, which holds that L2 speakers should try as best they can to copy a native-like accent. The intelligibility principle is the basis of the other approach, which holds that L2 speakers should be comfortably understandable. [1] published an extensive study in Language Learning, in which they examined the native-like accent of nearly 200 individuals who spoke Swedish as a second language. Spanish was the L1 of all the participants, who started learning Swedish between the ages of 1 and 47 years. These people were chosen because they self-identified as being native-like in Swedish and all were extremely high proficiency. When compared to native speakers in a battery of tests, none of the late learners (over the age of 11 when they started speaking Swedish) had equivalent scores. Thus, despite their exceptional language skills, these high proficiency L2 speakers were not comparable to native speakers [1].

[1] finding suggests that native speaker performance should not be the goal of L2 learners, but rather to direct to the status of highly intelligible, easily comprehensible bilingual speakers. As [24] noted, many ESL/EFL teachers are still cling to the nativist principle. Over the years, there have
been many talks about intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentlessness, and teachers stated that his/her students want help with aspects of their accent that don’t interfere with intelligibility – such as the interdental fricatives. They say that their students are compromised socially because they can’t make these sounds. It is doubtful that the “TH” sounds are the only problem those individuals have. Many L2 users of English who don’t make those sounds and who have no other pronunciation difficulties are accepted for who they are: articulate, fluent speakers.

VI. FOCUS ON METHODS AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

[13] suggests that ESL teachers “need to be provided with courses and materials to help them improve their effectiveness in teaching pronunciation.” She adds that there is also a need for “high quality, effective materials, especially computer-based materials with audio demonstrations, for learners of ESL pronunciation, both for self-access and for use in classes where the teacher needs support of this kind.” [13] says that teacher training and professional development need to take into account “developments in the area of second language phonology driven partly by an interest in psycholinguistics and theory of speech and partly by a need to know more about how to teach pronunciation to learners of a second language.” Teachers need a greater appreciation of the pronunciation difficulties faced by learners of ESL and the reasons for these difficulties, and a simple framework for understanding the situation of the second language learner. [22] notes that research in pronunciation has revealed that “difficult L2 contrasts (not just suprasegmentals) can interfere with intelligibility and a need therefore exists within the pronunciation curriculum to address the problems of L2 learners in identifying and producing difficult L2 speech contrasts.” Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) for pronunciation can be an effective tool as it “provides electronic visual feedback (EVF), which can help meet this essential need by showing the exact sound features that learners produce and thereby drawing attention to changes that they need to make.” [22]

VII. USE OF USEFUL INSTRUCTIONAL SOFTWARE

The next goal is to use more easy-to-use and useful instructional software. There are some very good researchers who have worked with technology, and there are some good programs, but nowhere near enough. Teachers have been encouraged to use technology resources. It is necessary that more teacher-friendly resources be developed. The key benefit of computer assisted pronunciation training is that it can be individualized to the student’s needs, but as [24] showed, this hasn’t occurred. Most commercial programs are still of the one-size-fits all variety, which means that students are going to waste considerable time if they go through them in lockstep fashion. The problem is that the market has focused on the look of programs – the bells and whistles, rather than the linguistic needs of the learners. Instructional software should be developed so that the teacher could easily change to his/her students’ specific needs for individual practice [24].

Automatic speech recognition would give learners the feedback they need, but unfortunately, it is unlikely to reach an accurate enough level for some time. There are current technologies that have great promise for opportunities to practice speaking comprehensibly with real listeners, but the extent to which the average ESL/EFL teacher uses these resources to improve pronunciation is a question in our mind [24].

VIII. FOCUS ON THE SUPRASEGMENTALS

In the late 1970s, several teachers/theorists took a stand by suggesting that at a very basic level if communicative competence was the goal of language learning, then it would have as one of its essential components, intelligible pronunciation [3]. For this reason, intelligibility rather than the native-like competence valued in traditional approaches became the goal of phonological instruction. Therefore, teaching speech from the perspective of suprasegmentals seems indispensable within the communicative approach to teaching EFL. However, [3] adds that although many theorists began to make a case for the role of suprasegmental phonology in communication, “many teachers continue with a limited conception of the role of explicit phonological instruction in the language classroom.” Curriculum and syllabus designers need to focus on the suprasegmental features of pronunciation. In making their case for emphasis in teaching rhythm to ESL learners in China for example, [8] discovered that Chinese students were not aware of the difference between the rhythm of the syllable-timed Chinese language and the stress timed English language and therefore drawing their attention to this suprasegmental feature helped significantly in improving their communicative ability.

Recent approaches to teaching pronunciation in computer-based contexts follow the communicative approach in teaching pronunciation. [20] stresses the need for making sure that students can always be understood and say what they want to say. They need to master “good pronunciation”, not perfect accents. That is, emphasis should be on suprasegmental features of pronunciation—not segmental aspects—to help learners acquire communicative competence [33]. [2] asserts that in recent years, increasing attention has been placed on providing pronunciation instruction that meets the communicative needs of non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. Empirical research and pronunciation materials’ writers suggest that teaching suprasegmentals before segmentals to intermediate and advanced NNSs could be more beneficial in a shorter period of time.”

IX. CONCLUSION

Most teacher preparation programs can introduce some focus on L2 pronunciation issues and that pronunciation can be better incorporated into L2 curricula and better assessed. We
are now at a point where most L2 teachers recognize that there is nothing wrong with having an accent, and that intelligibility and comprehensibility should be the goals of L2 speakers, not native-like status. Technology is advancing and there is a key role for virtual worlds and other sorts of practice opportunities informed by research. There are always at least two people involved in real communication and both sides should try to achieve communicative success, rather than putting all the responsibility on the shoulders of the L2 speaker. Teachers in the field of pronunciation teaching and research are the people best equipped to help L2 students. For those of us who teach at universities and colleges, we can start with our own students. A major change in teachers’ attitudes towards pronunciation instruction is indispensable and it is their job to speed up change. By incorporating current research and its implications into their teaching practice, teachers can help learners gain the skills they need for effective communication in English. It must be borne in mind that teachers are the models for their learners, so first of all they should have good pronunciation; otherwise, they can harm their students.

REFERENCES

Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani was born in Roodsar, Iran in 1969. The author has received B.A. degree in the field of English Translation from the Islamic Azad University of Tonekabon Campus, Mazandaran, Iran in February 20, 1993. He has also received M.A. degree in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Islamic Azad University of Garmser Campus, Semnan, Iran in April 23, 1999. He has been teaching English in the English Translation Department at the Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Guilan, Iran from 1999 to 2010. He was the Head of English Translation Department from 2007-2009. He is studying Ph.D. in Second Language Learning at the USM.
Mr. Pourhosein Gilakjani is the Faculty Member of the Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Iran.